



Care Partner Information

Tips for Providing Older Adult Care

Caring for LGBT Older Adults

Caring for older adults provides a chance to work with many people of different religions, cultures, races, or politics. Other differences are sexual identity and being in the LGBT community. Learning about these differences can improve the care and better meet the needs of different individuals.

What is LGBT?

LGBT stands for “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual” and “transgender.” Sometimes other letters are added that can mean different things to different people. The terms defined below are commonly used by older adults.

Lesbian	A woman who loves and forms sexual partnerships with women.
Gay	A man who loves and forms sexual partnerships with men. “Gay” can be used to describe all members of the LGBT community.
Bisexual	Someone who is attracted to both men and women. They may love or have sexual partners who are men or women.
Transgender	Someone who does not identify as the sex listed on their birth certificate.

There are millions of Americans who identify as LGBT. It is hard to know exactly how many LGBT people are in the U.S. because some people who have same-sex relationships may not feel connected to the LGBT community, or may prefer to keep their sexual identity private.

Each group in the LGBT community is different. But they all share some things in common that may be helpful for care partners to understand. These are described on the next page.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on older adult caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and community health representatives care for older adults. Available in English and Spanish at www.aging.arizona.edu

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Families of choice

Many in the LGBT community have family ties with people who are not from the families they grew up with. These “families of choice” often form because the person’s family that raised them does not know about or accept that the person is in the LGBT community. LGBT community members have the right to tell care partners who is and who is not part of their family. This means the person’s partner should be treated as a spouse, even if they are not legally married.

Protect their privacy

It is important to remember that not all family or friends of the older adult may know the person’s sexual identity. Sexual identity should never be shared unless the person says it is okay — not even with doctors or other care partners. Providing good care means respecting what older adults tell their friends and family, and respecting privacy.

Stigma and fear of discrimination

Stigma is when people think less of someone because they belong to a certain group or have certain traits. Discrimination is treating a person unfairly because they belong to a certain group or have certain traits. Stigma leads to discrimination. Those in the LGBT community have faced stigma and discrimination in many settings, such as work places, and in health care. Many LGBT older adults have had poor health care because of stigma and discrimination by nurses, doctors and other care partners. Many avoid care until the last minute for fear of being treated badly. Care partners should make sure their opinions about members of the LGBT community do not lead them to provide bad care.

Fear of judgement

Many LBGT older adults have lived their entire lives “in the closet.” This means they hide their sexual identities from their families, friends, co-workers and neighbors for fear others will judge them. In health care it is hard to hide this identity. Telling others about the person’s sexual identity is called “outing” the person, and is wrong. Care partners may also need to speak up for the person’s rights to privacy and fair treatment when others are not treating the person well.

It can be hard to work with people who have different beliefs, cultures and sexual identities. But it also can be a joy to learn from and about different people. Providing good care means learning about and respecting these differences.

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